

Transport and Health

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There are many links between transport and public health. Worldwide, death and injury from road traffic accidents are by far the most important, accounting for 1,3 million deaths and from 20 - 50 million non fatal injuries every year according to a recent WHO report. Some 90% of these occur in low to middle income countries where without proper preventive measures, a further increase is expected with the ongoing increase in road traffic.

Vehicles powered by internal combustion engines produce toxic air pollutants which adversely affect the health of traffic participants, subjects living close to busy roads and the population at large. Engineering controls on vehicles and fuels have mitigated some of these problems in the developed world. Again, the disease burdens are likely to be larger in low to middle income countries which have not yet been able to afford the most technologically advanced pollution controls. However, relatively few studies have been conducted in areas of the world likely to experience the worst problems.

Active modes of transport such as cycling and walking are being promoted in some developed countries as an alternative to driving cars. Although cyclists and pedestrians are at higher risk of inhaled pollutants - because of higher respiration rates - and of traffic accidents than car riders or users of public transport, there is general consensus that the health benefits of physical exercise associated with walking and cycling outweigh the pollution and accident risks.

Transport may also increase health risks of infection as especially in mass transport, transmission may easily occur. Disease vectors may also hitchhike their way to faraway places ("airport malaria"), and in an increasingly global market, foodborne diseases may also be more easily transported elsewhere.